

Consumer Branding of Products and Differences in Meanings Associated with Brand Names Across Selected Demographic Variables

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ABSTRAK

Menterjemahkan jenama-jenama keluaran asing ke dalam bahasa Cina adalah merupakan satu amalan biasa bagi pengeluar dan pengguna Cina di Malaysia. Jenama-jenama yang telah diterjemahkan ini ada kalanya membawa maksud yang berbeza berbanding dengan maksud yang ingin ditekankan pada keluaran tersebut. Satu kajian telah dijalankan untuk menentukan asas yang digunakan untuk penterjemahan ini dan juga perbezaan terhadap maksud jenama-jenama terpilih di kalangan pengguna-pengguna yang mempunyai ciri-ciri demografi yang berbeza. Kajian ini telah mendapati bahawa bunyi, simbol dan ciri-ciri serta kegunaan keluaran digunakan untuk tujuan menterjemah. Perbezaan maksud jenama-jenama ini juga didapati di kalangan responden dalam kumpulan-kumpulan demografi yang berbeza. Kedua-dua penemuan ini memberi implikasi bahawa pengeluar dan pengimpor keluaran perlu menentukan maksud jenama keluaran dalam bahasa atau dialek Cina menurut ciri-ciri demografi tertentu sebelum membuat keputusan menggunakan nama tersebut.

ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, almost all foreign or non-Chinese brand names are normally translated into the Chinese language by the relevant manufacturers, or as a matter of tradition by the Chinese themselves. Such translations sometimes produce literal and associated meanings that are different from the intended meanings. A study was undertaken to determine the bases of translation and differences in meanings of selected brand names across several demographic variables. The result of the study indicates that the sounds, symbols, and the product attributes and uses are normally used as the bases of translation. Associated meaning differences are also noted for some products brands across several demographic variables. Both findings strongly imply the need

for manufacturers or importers of foreign products to determine the meanings of their brand names in the Chinese language or dialects across several demographic variables that are deemed significant, before deciding to adopt the names.

INTRODUCTION

Multinational corporations in overseas markets must satisfy a multitude of requirements pertaining to package design and sizes, labeling, and measurement units. Most of these requirements are explicitly defined by the host countries' laws and business standards. For example, multinational manufacturers of consumer packaged goods in Kenya, Singapore and Malaysia must now conform to government standards for bottle, can, and packaged food sizes (Hill & Still 1985).

When the laws of host countries clearly stipulate these requirements, appropriate marketing strategies can be easily formulated for the local markets. Normally, a simple adaptation in marketing mix is sufficient towards fulfilling appropriate legal requirements. However, what seems to pose a common problem to most multinational corporations is the implicit requirements of culture and tradition. Where culture and tradition has a pervasive influence on consumption, a precise judgement on such requirements is absolutely critical. Therefore, one of the basic prerequisites to success in international markets is the ability to understand significant norms and values that are implicit in most cultures.

The present study addresses some issues that are pertinent to local cultural norms and values of the Chinese community in Malaysia, specifically related to literal meanings of product brand names and advertising copies in the Chinese language. The study also draws several implications relevant to the practice of international marketing.

CONCEPTUAL BASELINES

Douglas and Dubois (1977) noted the absence of clearcut guidelines for investigating cultural influences on consumer behavior, particularly those guidelines that are global in nature. Although the impact of cultural forces on behavior in general has been examined in most social science disciplines, each area of study such as psychology, sociology and anthropology has adopted a varied perspective on culture.

Similarly, any attempt to formulate a global theory on the relationship between culture and consumer behavior would seem remote, particularly because culture is specific to each region. Besides, a host of other

factors that are unique for each region such as norms, values, and role expectations, may also explain its variations. Nevertheless, it is the inherent societal values, institutional configurations, and behavior conventions of a region, conveyed through man-made communications and the indigenous language systems, that represent the referral point of purchasing and consumption activities. Within the market place, the information communicated to prospective buyers are those pertaining to brand names and other product attributes, designed in the various product advertisements.

Despite the fact that culture is country-specific, many multinational firms remain globally-oriented in their approach to marketing. For some such approach is feasible because of the greater interdependence of world markets and the increasing homogenization of the world population. Such interdependence and homogenization are particularly obvious in terms of similar product preference among world consumers, induced by improved standards of living, greater access to information, and greater mobility (Ray & Preble 1987).

Arguments for the practice of global marketing, therefore posit that the new manufacturing goal is to produce globally-standardized products at low prices. The savings from producing single-standard goods instead of offering different products for different countries, can be enormous. Such savings, if passed on to the consumers would mean cheaper goods and services. Similarly in the case of advertising, Ryans (1969) noted that it had been an important incentive for advertisers to use the universal approach because it eliminated the extra costs of using separate artists and copywriters, and other related costs involved in preparing entirely different campaigns for different countries.

On the contrary, the opponents of such strategy contend that the success of US multinationals overseas can be attributed to their differentiated marketing strategies. For example, Kentucky Fried Chicken in Malaysia adds on packets of chilli sauce and ketchup to be consumed along with the chicken, whereas back home in the USA, fried chicken is not normally eaten with any sauce.

From the above observation, it is implied that one of the challenging marketing tasks for international marketers is to design appropriate but differentiated marketing communications, related to branding and advertising of products and services. This is because the many characteristics of products, such as labelling, packaging, and branding could carry cultural connotations, and therefore must fulfill local requirements sufficiently (Hill & Still 1984). Such requirements include local taste, customs and lifestyles. This is somewhat consistent with the view underscored by Bouchard (1987) which advocates that global advertising does not exist since advertising is culturally-imperative, and it reflects the mood of a country at any given moment. Primarily, there are significant differences in the way ad-

vertisements are perceived, and so are product attributes and concepts, although the product function is probably similar across nations (Hornik 1980).

Advertising themes are also being translated into local languages in many countries. However, dictionary translation does not sufficiently capture the idiomatic interpretation (Cateora & Hess 1979), while the connotation of words and symbols requires meticulous attention from international marketers (Douglas & Dubois 1977). Therefore, a particular symbol representing a product brand must also be chosen carefully.

STUDY OBJECTIVE

A study was undertaken to investigate a common tradition among the Chinese in Malaysia, particularly in translating into or verbalizing brand names in their language or dialects. The main objectives of the study were (1) to determine the bases of translation or verbalization of brand names, and (2) to compare variations in meanings of translated or verbalized brand names across selected demographic variables and the dialects spoken in Malaysia, namely Cantonese, Hokkien and Hakka. Since Mandarin is also widely used by the Chinese in this country, meanings of brand names in the language are also examined along with the selected dialects. Mandarin is not a Chinese dialect, but is the written language of the community.

PROCEDURES

The population of the study was the Chinese in Malaysia with different spoken dialects. A group of Chinese students from the Faculty of Business Management, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, who spoke the relevant dialects were required to analyze the translation or verbalization of thirty-two brand names of products across various categories. These brands represented both local and imported products, having Western brand names. The students were required to indicate the bases of translation or verbalization, and the literal meanings of translated brand names as they were actually verbalized by the Chinese consumers.

The same brand names and their relevant translations were later included in an 11-page pretested questionnaire to measure meanings associated with selected brand names. Data were collected through personal interviews by trained enumerators who spoke similar dialects as the respondents. These respondents were selected through a two-stage cluster sampling. Dialect groups from different geographical regions in the country were first used as population clusters, out of which a sample of clusters were randomly drawn with the

use of a table of random numbers. Respondents were then selected from each cluster through a systematic sampling procedure based on known intervals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

DEMOGRAPHIC PARTICULARS

Personal interviews generated a response rate of 92%, resulting in a final sample size of 368 respondents. They were represented by 35% Cantonese-speaking Chinese, 28% Hakka, 20% Hokkien, and 3% of other dialects. About 13% of the remaining respondents responded to the questionnaire in Mandarin, although their mother tongues could be either one of the dialects mentioned above.

More than half of the respondents were 35 years old or younger. The mean age was 32 years. About 47% of those who responded were above 36 years old, with the youngest being 14 and the oldest being 72 years old. More than half of the respondents were female (57.3%) while about 42.7% were male, although the difference is virtually small. This was due to the selection of more housewives and students (38.9%) who were mostly available in the day when all the interviews were conducted. Most of them (41%) had completed high school, although a few (23.7%) had successfully completed higher education.

As most Chinese in Malaysia resided in the urban areas, about 50.3% were selected from cities (residential areas classified as having 10,000 people or more), and a further 10.9% and 32.9% respectively, were drawn from towns and small towns (those with population below 10,000). Only 6% were selected from villages (classified as residential areas with population of 1,000 and below).

MEANINGS OF BRAND NAMES

From a total of 32 brands representing both local and imported products selected for this study, seven brands are reported here. These brands are mostly known throughout the world and would provide for easy reference because of their international nature.

The different response rates for meanings associated with the seven brand names are presented in Appendix A. While Nescafe was never translated into the Chinese language, most respondents associated the brand name with plain coffee. However, for Coca-Cola and Citizen, the two brands were mostly associated with the products' performance and attributes, as emphasized in their advertisements. Maybelline, a brand name for a line of cosmetics, did not mean anything to the majority of the respondents, but for Camay most of

them associated the brand name with a beauty soap. Indeed, Camay was portrayed in the product advertisement as such. This was also true for Vick's Vapour Rub, where most of the respondents associated the brand name with flu and cough. Interesting enough for Camel, although there was no indication of cigarette or tobacco in the translated brand name or the advertisement, most respondents associated the brand name with tobacco.

BASES OF TRANSLATION

A particular sound generated by a Westernized brand name was mostly used as a basis for translating a brand into Chinese language. This was the case in point for three of the seven brands selected for the present discussion, particularly Coca-Cola, Camay and Maybelline. A group of Chinese characters were selected to verbalize the sound, however, the characters sufficiently, appropriately and closely portrayed the meanings or expressions on the products.

As shown in Appendix B, Coca-Cola was translated as "ho how ho lok" in Cantonese, and as "ke kou ke le" in Mandarin. The latter translation literally means "happiness for your mouth". However, it was somewhat different for Camay. While the sound remained as "kei may", the brand name was also verbalized to mean a "double beauty". Beauty was also the meaning ascribed to Maybelline line of cosmetics, which has been translated to sound as "mei bee lin". Its other meanings are flower and a girl's name.

Quite apart from the above, the basis for translating Camel into Chinese was the product symbol itself. This was quite a special case because the sound "Camel" in the English language could not be verbalized in the Chinese language. Therefore, the symbol was translated as "lok tuo yin" in Cantonese and "luo-tuo xiang yan" in Mandarin. The brand name was translated to indicate adventure, which was highly consistent with the company's attempt to market adventure gears and camping products.

However, a different approach was used to translate Citizen, although its symbol was still the basis of such translation. For this particular brand where a watch assumes a product image associated with gem stones and diamonds, Citizen was literally translated to mean a stone. The translated brand also symbolized a few product attributes believed to be associated with Citizen watches, such as accuracy and precision.

While Nescafe was not translated at all, but taken to simply mean coffee, the translation of Vicks Vapor Rub represented the use of a combination of sound and product attributes and usage, and the nature of the product itself. Particularly, the sound "Vicks" was verbalized in addition to the added Chinese characters which meant a cold and flu remedy, that was prepared in a form of soft cream.

In sum, the bases of translating foreign brand names into Chinese language are numerous. While the sound of brand name was widely used, product symbols were also utilized, especially in cases where a sound could not be verbalized well, or tended to impair meanings of brand names. Nevertheless, the Chinese characters intended to verbalize brand names were carefully selected such that they closely represented the projected product image. Consequently, product image, nature and product use are equally important in the process of translating brand names into the Chinese language.

DIFFERENCES IN MEANINGS OF BRAND NAMES

As indicated earlier, the translation and verbalization of brand names were done to elicit meanings that are consistent with the product concept and image. However, meanings of brand names among consumers tended to differ or otherwise consistent across different demographic factors. Table 1 presents the results of Chi-square analyses of differences in meanings ascribed to seven brand names across selected demographic variables.

DIALECTS

As Table 1 shows, meanings ascribed to Coca Cola were not significantly different across the different dialects. Indeed, Coca-Cola was the only brand that did not significantly generate different meanings across dialects, compared to other brands which achieved significance beyond the accepted level of 0.05. The brand Coca Cola meant almost the same across various dialects, which was associated with happiness in the mouth. Nescafe which was never translated, but pronounced as the brand name itself, was significant but at a slightly higher level (0.06). The remaining brands also differed in their meanings as they were translated or verbalized differently by respondents of the different dialects.

RESIDENTIAL AREAS

Both Coca-Cola and Nescafe did not mean differently to the respondents who lived in different residential areas. Precisely, whether a respondent resided in urban or rural areas, Coca-Cola and Nescafe were essentially similar in meanings. However, the meanings associated with the remaining brands were significantly different by urban dan rural respondents. For example, Camel was mostly associated with cigarettes and tobacco, Camay as a beauty soap, and Vick's Vapour Rub as a flu and cough remedy. In this case, respondents associated the meaning of each brand with the product itself. Maybelline had no specific meanings to most respondents as it was never translated, but pronounced as the brand itself. However, Citizen was associated more with its performance and attributes, as portrayed in the advertisement.

SEX GROUPS

The various brand names did not achieve significance across sex groups, except for Camel which tended to be significant at a slightly higher level of 0.08. This implies that all brands but Camel, were not different in meanings between male and female respondents. For Camel, the brand name was viewed differently in certain aspects, especially in terms of its product attributes. However, to most female respondents, the brand name provided no specific meaning or associated the brand name with adventures, as portrayed by the advertisement itself.

MARITAL STATUS

Three brands appeared to achieve significance in meaning differences between single, married and widowed respondents. They were Camay, Maybelline and Citizen. Although significant at a slightly higher level than 0.05, Coca-Cola may also be considered as significant in generating meaning differences across respondents of different marital status. Again for Coca-Cola and Citizen most respondents recognized the basic product, besides the tendency to associated the brand name with the products' performances and attributes. Camay was still associated with a beauty soap, while Maybelline to most respondents, did not carry any specific meaning. In this case, each of the brand was never translated, hence, was associated either with the product itself or with what the advertisement claimed it to be.

OCCUPATIONS

Camel, Camay, and Citizen were the three brands which seemed different to the respondents of different occupational groups. Coca-Cola was also significantly different in meanings, however, at a higher level (0.07). The majority of respondents associated Camel with cigarettes and tobacco, by relating to the product itself, while Camay was mostly taken as a beauty soap, consistent with the advertisement. It was quite a contrary for Citizen, where the majority of respondents ascribed meanings to the brand in terms of its product attributes but not the product itself. Similarly for Coca-Cola, its product attributes were predominantly associated with the mere fact that it was an imported soft drink.

INCOME

Income was not a discriminating variable in significantly differentiating meanings of brand names. No single brand appeared different in meanings across the various income groups. Therefore, regardless of the level of income, Nescafe was still coffee, and so were for the other brands where the meanings centered around the product attributes, as emphasized in the advertisements, or the basic product itself.

EDUCATION

Significant differences in meanings were noted across educational levels for three brands namely, Camel, Maybelline, and Citizen. Again, the majority of respondents associated Camel as the product itself, that was cigarettes or as a brand that signified no specific meanings. Similarly, to most respondents, Maybelline did not signify any specific meaning as the brand was verbalized as it was. However, the meaning of Citizen was mostly associated with a watch, differentiated along its performance and attributes which was consistent with the claim made in the advertisement of the product.

AGE

Except for Nescafe, all other brands were perceived significantly different in meanings across age groups. To any person regardless of age, Nescafe essentially meant coffee. But Coca-Cola tended to differ in meanings according to different age groups, either in terms of product attributes and performance, that it was an imported soft drink, or its image as a product (drink) for happy occasion. These were very consistent with the image portrayed in the product's advertisement. The brand was also signified to have no specific meanings. For all other brands that appeared to be significantly different in meanings, the majority of respondents ascribed the brands to the products' attributes and performances, as indicated in the advertisements. For the brands that were never translated but pronounced as they were, respondents took them as having no specific meanings.

IMPLICATIONS

Income levels and sex were obviously not powerful in discriminating meanings of brand names. This was indeed expected, because associated meanings of brand names among the Chinese should be specific by language or dialects. Other components that may influence either language or dialects may similarly generate differences in meanings. In this context, residential areas, age, education, occupation, and marital status are basically important correlates either to the language or dialects. It is the contrary for income and sex to exert influence of similar magnitude on language or dialects. However, the most powerful discriminators on meanings of brand names are dialects, areas of residence, and age, because they are associated significantly with the most number of brands. (Table 1)

The implication is obvious that the three variables are important for testing differences in meanings ascribed to brand names by Chinese consumers. Accordingly, it would be quite sufficient to investigate the extent of differences in meanings of product brands by simply investigating such meanings across the different dialects. An effective result may also be obtained

TABLE 1 Difference in perceived meanings across selected demographic group

Demographic Variables	Chi-square Value						
	Coca-Cola	Nescafe	Camel	Camay	Maybelline	Citizen	Vicks Vapor Rub
Dialects (Probability)	47.072 (0.206)	24.120 (0.063)	72.539 (0.000)	107.995 (0.000)	94.622 (0.000)	127.522 (0.000)	99.309 (0.000)
Residential Areas (Probability)	32.978 (0.105)	6.345 (0.705)	45.588 (0.000)	56.811 (0.000)	45.335 (0.002)	32.403 (0.020)	51.616 (0.000)
Sex (Probability)	9.878 (0.274)	1.723 (0.632)	9.948 (0.077)	4.379 (0.821)	5.983 (0.542)	3.692 (0.718)	7.103 (0.311)
Marital Status (Probability)	24.813 (0.073)	7.181 (0.304)	11.234 (0.340)	43.317 (0.000)	30.064 (0.007)	25.746 (0.012)	13.064 (0.364)
Occupations (Probability)	99.425 (0.070)	35.176 (0.236)	77.448 (0.008)	146.656 (0.000)	73.194 (0.374)	86.713 (0.014)	55.201 (0.651)
Income (Probability)	18.561 (0.972)	15.630 (0.209)	26.880 (0.139)	42.905 (0.094)	38.191 (0.095)	21.636 (0.601)	24.782 (0.418)
Education (Probability)	62.765 (0.249)	22.321 (0.381)	50.548 (0.043)	63.699 (0.224)	69.997 (0.026)	60.580 (0.032)	47.764 (0.250)
Age (Probability)	64.517 (0.000)	10.675 (0.299)	28.339 (0.020)	56.539 (0.000)	41.388 (0.005)	37.279 (0.005)	34.717 (0.010)

if such differences are examined across people from big cities, towns and rural areas. Yet, age is also important particularly by the extent of experience associated with it. Owing to the influence from different experiential backgrounds, attitudes, and a host of other related factors that may be associated with age, meanings ascribed to brand names are bound to differ significantly.

It further implies the need for marketers to ensure that brand names carry similar intended meanings across all dialects, especially for those name which sound Western, or basically are not Chinese names. Ascribed meanings to brand names must also be investigated for their relevance and appropriateness among Chinese of all ages from different residential areas. The process of branding a product and determining its meaning in Chinese ought to be done simultaneously, before deciding to adopt the brand name.

The same procedure must be followed for products that are imported into the country, where their original brand names are normally maintained. This is especially pertinent in countries were Chinese dialects are being spoken, or countries whose languages are tonal in character. The translation of brand names into the local languages is obligatory, and such translation should cover appropriate characters whose ultimate meanings are not impaired. Products with brand names whose meanings are impaired, have negative connotations, or are basically offensive, may be unpopular alternatives to prospective buyers.

Finally, the present study sufficiently indicates the importance of product symbols or pictorial representations and illustrations. As these have been used as the bases of translation, symbolic representations must be meticulously examined for their meanings in local languages or dialects. Such symbols should not suggest any identity or implied meanings that may be offensive to target consumers. This is because symbols representing product brands are also important as purchase references, especially to buyers who are not fluent in other languages to enable them to verbalize the brand names correctly. Alternatively, product symbols will be used by these groups of buyers to indicate their preference for a particular brand.

CONCLUSION

It may be risky for international marketers to adopt a global approach in marketing their products overseas. An undifferentiated marketing strategy may not work, especially to use an original brand name or advertising copy, without particularly investigating what it means in the local languages.

While some of the marketing mix may be implemented globally, brand names and advertising copy must be adapted to local culture and tradition. This is essential because brand names and advertising copy tend to be

translated by the local consumers, or perceived in a manner consistent with their own personal norms and values.

In some cases, a perfect name or copy may sound offensive, plain ridiculous, or even pornographic when translated or verbalized in the local language. Consequently, prospective customers may be discouraged to select a particular brand, but compelled to select an alternative brand, when they have to mention the brand name to their retailers. This is a fairly common practice in many developing countries such as Malaysia, where consumers have to buy most of their daily requirements from conventional retail outlets, most of which do not cater for self-service facilities.

Appendix A

Frequencies and percentages of meanings of brand names

<i>Meanings of Brand Names</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
	Nescafe	
Coffee	117	41.2
Product Performance and Attributes	88	31.0
No Specific Meanings	69	24.3
Others	10	3.5
	284	100.0
	Coca-Cola	
Product Performance and Attributes	149	42.3
Soft Drink from USA	99	28.1
Happy Occasions	64	18.2
No Specific Meanings	31	8.8
Young and Lively	4	1.1
Bad if Excessive	2	0.6
Sound Like Tea	1	0.3
Stupid	1	0.3
Sounds Sexy	1	0.3
	352	100.0
	Camay	
Beauty Soap	93	30.2
No Specific Meanings	87	28.2
Product Performance and Attributes	67	21.8
A Girl's Name	25	8.1
Others	18	5.8

A Common Soap	9	2.9
Product's Store	6	2.0
A European Product	2	0.7
An Upper Class	1	0.3
	<hr/>	<hr/>
	308	100.0

Camel

Cigarettes and Tobacco	109	31.1
No Specific Meanings	107	30.5
Product Performance and Attributes	79	22.5
Symbolizes Adventures	37	10.5
Others	18	5.1
An Old Brand	1	0.3
	<hr/>	<hr/>
	351	100.0

Maybelline

No Specific Meanings	127	43.2
Product Performance and Attributes	62	21.1
Cosmetics	46	15.7
A Girl's Name	37	12.6
Others	13	4.4
Same as the Brand Name	6	2.0
A Name of a Flower	2	0.7
A Common Product	1	0.3
	<hr/>	<hr/>
	294	100.0

Citizen

Product Performance and Attributes	143	41.9
A Watch	112	32.8
No Specific Meanings	42	12.3
Others	16	4.7
Rocks and Stones	12	3.5
Time Indicator	8	2.4
Stars	8	2.4
	<hr/>	<hr/>
	341	100.0

Vick's Vapour Rub

Flu and Cough	133	40.0
No Specific Meanings	88	26.4
Product Performance and Attributes	51	15.3
Others	28	8.4
Sounded Western	19	5.7
For Children	9	2.7
Product Usage	5	1.5
	<hr/>	<hr/>
	333	100.0

Appendix B
Verbalized brand names in different dialects

Brand Names	Verbalized Brand Names in Mandarin	Cantonese	Literal Meanings
Coca Cola	<i>ke koe ke le</i>	<i>ho how ho lok</i>	happiness for your mouth
Nescafe	<i>chia fei chin</i> (not translated but pronounced as it is)	<i>ka fei ching</i> (not translated but pronounced as it is)	Coffee concentrate
Camel	<i>luo-tuo xiang yan</i> (adventure)	<i>lok tuo yin</i>	camel
Camay	<i>kei may</i> (not translated but pronounced as it is)	<i>kei may</i> (not translated but pronounced as it is)	double beauty
Maybelline	<i>mei bee lin</i> (not translated but pronounced as it is)	<i>mei bee lin</i> (not translated but pronounced as it is)	beauty
Citizen	<i>shi ying piao</i>	<i>saik eng piu</i>	a stone
Vick's Vapour Rub	<i>wei ke si shang</i> <i>feng gao</i>	<i>wai hak si</i> <i>xiong fong ko</i> (prepared in a form of soft cream)	a cold and flu remedy

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